

Dear Beautiful Mummas,

I write this letter to you connected in our shared experience – our love for our babies (Little or Big) and our family and our commitment to doing the best by them as much as possible every day.

I know that you have been on an incredible journey recently as you've navigated pregnancy (and all that goes with that often-challenging journey – through fertility issues, conception struggles and loss of Little Ones whose place never leaves our hearts); giving birth to a Little Human (and the incredible experience that this is – whether your birth plan was met or not); and then the incredibly wild ride that it is to care for that Little One Earth-side – especially in the early days, weeks and months.

I have stood with you through the jubilation, the overwhelm, the tears, the anxiety, the judgement, the joy...and fundamentally, the growth of you as a Woman.

I am so privileged to join with you more directly now as you (and your family) take another leap in your Life's Journey as you contemplate, consider, plan and take the first Little or Big Steps into a 'formal' work environment (we of course know that Motherhood / Parenthood is the most enormous job of all; albeit unpaid and often unrecognised).

I know that you are likely to be experiencing a whole host of thoughts and emotions at this time. You'll also likely be accessing or provided with (willingly or otherwise!) with lots of information and learnings from other people. I (or other people, whether they be health professionals, family, friends or strangers as is often the case) can provide you with information and learnings from their own experience. Hopefully this information is helpful in the main.

This guide is designed to cut-through all the noise that the information (and information overload) can often create and bring you back to the basics or Fundamentals that matter the most as you step back into working after maternity leave.

Independent and somewhat regardless of these attempts to be informed, it will be a journey – a journey for you, for your Little One and your family. We can only do our best to anticipate the challenges so that we're somewhat equipped to navigate them with a degree of confidence. But so much is unpredictable at the same time. Being grounded in some Fundamental Facts and your own Inner Knowing (and tuning in to what this and then having confidence to act from this place/space) will set you up best for this journey and to navigate whatever the weather throws at you.

In a small way, I hope that this guide helps you weather the storms and experience the full the beauty of the sunshine and rainbows along the way.

With much love and gratitude,

Sascha

5 Fundamental Facts to Guide Your Return to Work

Here are 5 Facts that can anchor you as you face the conflicting emotions and thoughts that arise when transitioning back from maternity (parental) leave.

My intention with identifying these 5 Facts in a short and sharp way is so that when you start to get caught up in thoughts and emotions (and many kinds and often at the same time), that you can come back to these Facts and remember what counts the most.

May these be your Anchor when you're feeling knocked about by the waves of guilt, uncertainty, worry and possibly angst. I will work through each of these Facts in a little more detail now.

DR SASCHA - CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST @THESILVERLININGCOLLECTIVE

5 Facts to Guide your Return to work

- It will be a process...and a journey, with some challenging and some easier days...you will find a new rhythm with Time, Patience, and Compassion.
- Your relationship with your baby is what counts the most. Understanding and being able to respond consistently and sensitively to your baby's needs is the key to Everything.
- Your baby and your relationship with your baby will not be damaged by being cared for by others (with a few caveats).
- You are not the same person as you were Before Kids (and that's ok).
- 5 You are not designed to do it All.

Fact 1: It will be a process...and a journey, with some challenging and some easier days...you will find a new rhythm with Time, Patience and Compassion.

You are likely to feel mixed feelings.

Returning to work (outside of Mum and home duties) is an inevitable reality for many of us.

This may be because you need to work in order to sustain the life and lifestyle of your family i.e. many of us need to return to work after the government paid parental leave has ceased or at least return in some capacity. You may or may not be happy with this situation.

You may need to return to work because you work in your own business or a family business and not returning is not a choice.

You may really enjoy your work and what work means to you in terms of your identity, purpose, cognitive stimulation, financial freedom and opportunity...in other words, you enjoy working and want to continue this part of your life.

Or your circumstances may be any configuration of the above options.

Similarly, your feelings will be impacted by your personal journey above. The reasons motivating your return to work will impact the way you feel about this transition and, potentially, how you frame or consider this for your Little One.

You are likely to receive strong, often mixed, messages from your Inner Circle and the Wider World.

However, I would suggest that regardless of YOUR feelings and personal preferences and own inner knowing, you will be taking in various subtle and some not-so-subtle messages about your decision to return to work and the choices that you make as a consequence. Often these messages are conflicting and conflictual.

Queue Mum Guilt.

We are exposed to a barrage of messages about what it means to be a Good Mum. Or what we need to do or not do to be a Good Mum, raise a Good Child or what is best for your child.

Don't work. Work but don't let Mothering impact your work or your output. Childcare is damaging to your child's development. Kids will only develop social skills if they go to childcare and interact with other kids.

Fact 4 and 5 (in Part 2 of this Guide to come) will offer some practical tools to help you respond to these messages and the feelings they can evoke. In the meantime, take comfort that you are not alone, many have trod this path before (and survived, if not, thrived) and

Nurturing Secure Transitions – For Mummas and Bubbas (and their Families) ultimately, that your journey will be unique. You will get there – with Time, Patience and Compassion...and the Facts herein. It will be a process...a journey for you both / you all.

Fact 2:

Your Relationship with Your Little One is what Counts the Most. Understanding and being able to respond consistently and sensitively to your baby's needs is the key to Everything.

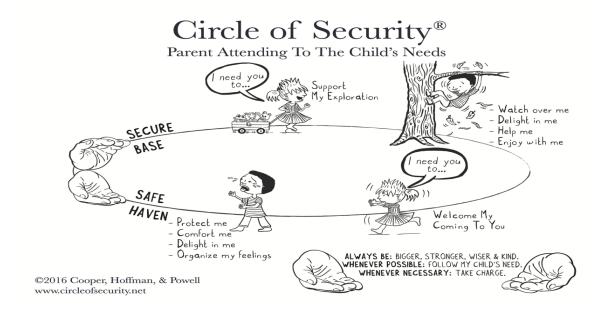
⊕ The Power of Developing a Secure Attachment with our Little Ones

- In addition to their temperament and other biological variables that are largely outside of our (or anyone's control) (see Fact 3), the quality of your relationship with your Little One is THE most predictive of their development through childhood and into adulthood. Put in another way, there are so many things that you cannot control in your child's life. So many things, experiences, situations, possible traumas, overwhelming moments of sadness but also joy that your Little Human will have to navigate. So many things that we both can't control, nor predict.
 - Possibly one of the only things that you can strongly influence is the quality of the relationship that you have, build and grow with your Little One.
 - Kids that develop a secure attachment relationship with at least one adult in their life are likely to experience optimised brain development - which has implications for learning and academic achievement, our capacity to regulate emotions and behaviour and our ability to form meaningful connections and relationships with others.

What do we mean when we refer to a Secure Attachment Relationship? What does this look like in practice?

The diagram displayed over the page most simply describes the Process that occurs, enabling us to form a secure attachment relationship between us and our Little One. This occurs by us as Parents (or Caregivers) being the "The Hands" that provide a Secure Base for our Little Ones to explore the world, safe in the knowledge that we will be ready and waiting for them to return to us as their Safe Haven to provide comfort and support as they need.

Attachment Theory has demonstrated conclusively and across many cultural groups and related family configurations, that the more times we are able to follow our child's lead in exploring the world (i.e. providing sufficient support and encouragement for them to explore based on their developmental capability and need) and then welcoming them back in irrespective of what they need from us (i.e. being able to support them emotionally if they are distressed, delighting in their achievements and sharing in their joy), that our Little One will grow up predicting that you'll be available to support their needs. This experience will enable them to generalise this experience to the rest of the world which is foundational to their emotional regulation skills, social skills, academic achievement and living a meaningful life.



[More information on this model available at

https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/circle-of-security-model/what-is-the-circle-of-security/]

- Nurturing a secure attachment relationship with our kids is not as simple as simply wanting this to happen or occur.
 - Many factors can get in the way of us being sufficiently Emotionally Available to meet the needs of our Little Ones is they go in and out on the Circle. This can be as simple as we don't have enough of us to go around (I know this road well #fourkids #someoneisalwayscrying), we have priority tasks that need to get done (e.g. preparing a meal, preparing for the day, a work deadline), through to if we are really stressed, anxious or not feeling so good in our mood. Our own experiences pre-kids, in terms of our own experience of being parented through to other stressful or traumatic events across our life can also impact our ability to sufficiently and consistently meet the needs of our kids.
- That said, we don't have to get it right all of the time, nor should we aim for this as this isn't healthy for our kids' development either. They need to experience rupture (i.e. when we don't meet their needs or don't meet their needs in the time and place that they want) within the strong hands of our secure relationship overall to be able to learn how to manage their own emotions in a more independent manner, aligned with their developmental capacity. Through this process, they develop greater capacity for regulation of their emotions with greater independence which underpins being able to demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity.
 - Critically, getting it right enough of the time i.e. striving for Good Enough, literally means being able to meet the emotional needs of our Little One at least 30% of the time. Or 1 out 3 times when they approach you (subtly and sometimes not-so-subtly) with a need. This means that you have huge room

for error or for not getting it 'right'. What our kids need in these moments is that (a) we acknowledge when we haven't been at our best (this can look like tuning out on your phone, dismissing your LO's needs in the moment e.g. "In a moment...later...when I'm finished this...through to Flipping Your Lid and yelling, acting out angrily) and (b) to then reconnect with our Little One in a meaningful and genuine way.

Your Wellbeing is Fundamentally Linked to the Wellbeing of your Child

So I know you know all the talk about 'self-care'. It can seem like one of those tasks on your to-do list that you'll get to one day but that really is not that important. When I talk about self-care, I'm not thinking of massages, pedicures, girls' nights out, date nights or weekends away. I'm thinking of the small acts or actions that you can take throughout your day to keep you grounded and connected with the here-and-now. By being connected in this way, you're in a much better position to be able to navigate the ups-and-downs of daily life (in this modern world) and, in turn, be able to tune into and sensitively respond to what your kids or Little One needs in any given moment.

For some of us, engaging in work is quite important, maybe even fundamental, to filling up our cups. This doesn't mean that you have to be thriving in your work, kicking massive career goals and breaking glass ceilings or contributing to global changes in the work you undertake. It can simply mean that by working you are better able to meet the needs of your family – kids and partner included – by providing financially through to meeting your own personal and professional development needs.

Please always come back to the fact that what is most important and influential to our kids' development – across all domains that we consider important (their learning, their social and emotional competence) – is the quality of the relationship that we have with them...not the quantity. And, we're actually spending more time now with our kids than our previous generations of Mums and Grandmothers did even though they were largely not working outside the home to the same extent as we do today.

If your cup is filled (it might not be dripping over but at least half way there), you're better able to support the needs of your family – your kids and partner included. And participating in work may be the liquid that helps fill your cup.

Fact 3:

Your baby and your relationship with your baby will not be damaged by being cared for others (with a few caveats)

#Attending professional day or child care is not damaging to your child's development

- Child care generally refers to fee-paying, out of home care by someone who is paid to care for your child and is caring for kids in a group setting, either at a centre or family day care environment.
- The research evidence over at least the last 30 years has demonstrated or concluded that the Quality, Quantity, Age of Entry and Type of Care our kids participate in have way less effect on our kids' developmental outcomes than does our capacity as Mums to be sensitive and responsive to our kids' needs. Remember, the guts of the point above, our capacity to be sensitive and responsive is strongly related to our mental health and wellbeing.
- Quality of child care is an important variable though. High quality care regardless of setting or provider is associated with more positive outcomes for children compared with low quality care.
- O What does high quality care look like?
 - Quality but also frequent positive care-giving interactions between carers and kids. This means looking for – frequent, warm, responsive interactions as well as staff-child ratios and staff turnover (look for stability; centres where staff have been for some time, even if they are rotating around rooms)
 - Be assured that the quality of care provided by Australian child care centres and providers is of a high standard as viewed across the world. Some of the research linking developmental risk for kids in attending child care mostly comes from other countries where the quality of care is variable i.e. have confidence in the strength of our child care system and providers.

(See for a summary of the research literature on this topic at:

https://www.aaimh.org.au/key-issues/position-statements-and-guidelines/AAIMHI-Position-paper-4-Child-care.pdf)]

I highly recommend the excellent book, The Bottom Line for Baby (Tina Payne Bryson, 2020). On page 54-55, Payne Bryson notes:

There is no global, inherently right or wrong decision (about returning to work vs staying at home with Bub). Make the call that feels most right for your child, yourself and your family, knowing that there are sacrifices and drawbacks that come with the benefits you enjoy with any decision. It won't be easy, but let your love for your child lead you to the best choice possible given your current circumstances.

 \oplus My child will form a stronger bond or attachment or relationship with other carers than me.

- I know this can be a hard Fact to come to terms with for some of us but we actually want our kids to have a strong and secure bond with someone other than us when it comes to them settling well into child care or care outside or beyond us (or their other parent, if relevant to your situation).
- However, have confidence in the Fact that your relationship with your Little One will not be superseded by these other relationships. Technically, they are called "secondary secure attachment bonds". Your relationship will remain primary (again, independent and regardless of variables like the age they start in childcare and how often they attend).
- Think about these Caregivers as part of your Village. If we were in a village, we wouldn't be as conflicted about leaving our kids in the care of others.

⊕ Separating from you and being cared for my someone other you will invariably be stressful (to some degree or another) for your Little One but this will not permanently damage them.

It may get harder before it gets easier.

In my personal and professional experience of supporting lots of families, the transition to childcare and return to work for Mums is always an adjustment. The reality is that it will be hard because in a way, it should be hard. You created this little human, have spent many months-to-years lovingly nurturing their growth and development and you are the centre of your Little One's universe.

But please take comfort in the process and the journey and that it will likely get easier with time. You will find your feet in your "New Normal" as will your Little One and the rest of your family.

 \mathcal{D} How our Little Ones adjust to being cared for outside of their primary caregivers and attachment relationships is impacted or influenced by a mix of both our Little One's temperament, their age (and stage) of development, and the process of transition that you have been able to provide.

Not all kids are created equal. Their uniqueness will influence their transition to being cared for by someone other than you.

How your child responds to the inevitable separation from you is not necessarily indicative of something being 'wrong'. It is both dependent on their age and dependent on their temperament. Independent of attendance at childcare, temperament is such an important variable for us as parents to consider as we understand our children, either in any given moment or when we look to the future of them and their development.

DEEPER DIVE INTO UNDERSTANDING TEMPERAMENT AND ATTACHMENT (AS THEY RELATE TO TRANSITIONS IN PARTICULAR)

Understanding Temperament

We are not all born equal. In this regard, I mean that we are all born with individual differences in terms of our biological tendencies in how we react to situations, people and stimulation. We can consider both our own and our kids' inherent, physical differences on the following dimensions. As you read through this list, make a mental note of what your personal experience on this dimension is but, in the context of this conversation, what your child is like or what their preference is or preferences are...

- 1. **Activity level or energy level.** Some people naturally have higher energy and activity levels than others. Does it feel like your Little One is constantly on the go or on the move? Or is your Little One more Chilled and happy to sit and relax for a good chunk of their day.
- 2. **Approach withdrawal.** This dimension considers our our Little Ones' first and usual reactions to new things, experiences, places, ideas or people. Some kids are more comfortable approaching new people and situations (like a new play group or playground), while others hang back and are more cautious, at least initially.
- 3. **Adaptability** is closely related or tied to the dimension of Approach/Withdrawal in that it considers how easily we adapt to changes or transitions in routine. Most kids that are slow-to-approach (and more inclined to withdraw), will also be slow-to-adapt to change.
- 4. **Mood.** I'm sure you can all think of people in your life whom have a greater tendency to towards being happy and those that are more inclined towards melancholy. Some of this tendency is explained by this Temperament Dimension. What would you say your child's tendency is?
- 5. **Rhythmicity.** How regular are the child's physical/biological patterns (e.g., eating, sleeping)? I hope you're starting to get the picture that these dimensions are generally all connected in some way. With respect to rhythm, some kids respond really well to a regular pattern of routine around eating and sleeping, whereas other kids are more flexible and better able to respond to changes in routine as it relates to their biological patterns.
- 6. **Persistence.** How capable is your Little One of persisting with what may be considered a difficult task, like stacking blocks or fitting puzzle pieces through to sounding out a novel world? Some kids (and people!) might be described as Stubborn in this regard or otherwise!
- 7. **Attention span...**which is of course related closely to Persistence, is our child's ability to focus on one task for a length of time.
- 8. **Threshold.** This dimension relates to our ability and our child's ability to handle external stimuli such as loud noises or different tactile experiences.
- 9. **Intensity.** Remembering that all of these dimensions exist just by nature and so naturally...some Big and Little People alike will have a tendency to emotionally react strongly or less strongly to events.
- 10. **Distractibility.** And finally, this dimension refers to the degree to which our child is easily distracted from a task or activity.

If we put our assessment of either ourselves or our kids on all of these dimensions together, we can often come up with an overarching description of this concept of Temperament. For example, we'll often be able to identify one of three categories of temperament: "difficult," "easy," and "slow to warmup."

I think an important factor / variable / or consideration to take in mind, however, is that the perception of temperament on these categorical descriptions, without reference to the Dimensions noted, is often linked to our own Temperamental preferences as Parents and how there is often a mismatch between our child's natural instincts and our own. Consider an easy going adult who doesn't like routine and is happy to chill, with a Bubba that is hypersensitive to change and quite intense and emotionally sensitive.

So, for some kids, regardless of what you do or don't do in preparing them for the inevitable separations that are part and parcel of growing up, they will find separations more tricky (i.e. anxiety-provoking) than others. The key is not in trying to either change them i.e. toughen them up or talk them out of their experience but be sensitive to what their needs are, validate these and provide kind but firm guidance, encouragement and support. Remember the Circle of Security when thinking about what your child needs in any given moment. Think...what can I do support them, knowing what I know about their temperament, to navigate this transition more calmly and more easily?

If they are struggling to adjust and leave you, this may be accounted for substantially by their temperament (not what you are doing or not doing...or the same for the alternative care). Conversely, if your Little One waves you off with a (seeming) care in the world, this isn't a reflection of their love or relationship with you (in a bad way!).

Understanding Attachment (Developmental) Milestones

As I mentioned earlier, developing a Secure Attachment Relationship with our Little One does not "just happen" for most of us. There are things we can focus on and do explicitly to maximise meeting our kids' needs consistently and reliably. [The Circle of Security-Parenting Program that I mentioned in Fact 2 provides an explicit roadmap to understand ourselves and therefore our kids better].

Similarly, attachment develops over time, just as any other developmental variable like speech and language for example.

First and foremost, it is important to reinforce and say explicitly that seeking proximity to our caregivers is a biological imperative designed to ensure our survival (so it therefore has extremely primitive origins that are seen in other mammals also). Babies are instinctively 'designed' to elicit caring responses from the adults around them and keep them in close contact with them (again, to maximise their survival). Some babies (largely based on their biology...their temperament) have greater needs for closeness than others. However, overwhelmingly, most babies will want to be close to their attachment figures — by being touched, by touching, seeing and smelling. If they are separated from their attachment figures — and being 'separated' can look different depending on the age of the Little One and their temperament — they will engage various behaviours to increase the likelihood that you will come back. This looks like crying, emotional distress, clinging, or crawling back to you.

The 5 stages of Attachment Formation:

Pre-Attachment

The Pre-Attachment stage of attachment development occurs in the very early weeks of a Little Human's time on Earth, in the first six weeks or so. During this stage, our Little One is of course so vulnerable and dependent on Big People for staying alive, so often Bubs at this age (and stage) will happily allow any (safe) adult to attend to their needs. This is often why Bubs can be 'passed around' easily to family, friends and other visitors without Little Ones becoming distressed. But Bubbas can distinguish their Mums' voice, smell and face...setting up the critical foundations for brain development and attachment relationship to come.

Indiscriminate Attachment

From this age through to around 6 months, babies will start to show greater preference for familiar adults but will generally accept comfort from other people / most others. However, they will show a preference for their Attachment Figures (i.e. close carers e.g. Mum and Dad) as they start to be able to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar people somewhat as a function of their physical development also. Often, Little Ones at this age and stage of development will generally be able to separate with limited anxiety or protesting from their primary attachment figure but Temperament plays a big part in their response.

Discriminate Attachment

The next stage of Attachment Development occurs (generally) from 7-8 months onwards. During this time, Little Ones have more clearly and strongly identified who their primary attachment figures are (namely, Mum and Dad). As a result, they are more likely to demonstrate anxiety around perceived 'strangers'. This might be family friends or even other family members (whom may have been able to comfort your Little One previously). This can be considered 'separation anxiety' but is completely developmentally normal i.e. it is not indicative of an issue or an anxiety problem. Along with cognitive/brain developmental leaps in which your Little One understands that you exist even if you cannot be seen, Your Little One has determined that you are their One and will do all that they can to get you as their Primary Attachment Figure to return to them via cry, clinging and crawling or walking back to you. This period of development often coincides with when many Mums are returning to paid employment and Little Ones start out-of-home care or care by others for the first time. It is critical to remember and consider this if your baby is in this stage of attachment development because much of what you may observe when separating at transition time may be indicative of normal developmental behaviour, not a specific adverse response to being cared for by others per say. This anxiety on separation can continue through to 18months old for many bubs.

Multiple Attachment Figure Phase

By around 10 months of age for many Little Ones, they move or start to move into a Multiple Attachment phase of development. This means that they start to show attachment to multiple adults including both parents, grandparents, and siblings which can make separations easier. Babies will generally form a 'hierarchy' of attachment figures, ranging from primary, to secondary and so on. Even though you may be separated from your baby during the day / whilst working, you're way way more than likely to remain the Queen of this Hierarchy.

Growing Independence

Around the ages of 2 to 4 years (often generally around 3 years), there is a gradual reduction in the need for physical proximity by our Little Ones to us as their primary attachment figures. Our not-so-Little-Ones-anymore, are more capable of spending time apart from us. This coincides with other formal forms of separation provided by Kindergarten and Preschool programs.

** Take a few moments to reflect on what this information is likely to mean for your Little One's experience as they transition to care. How would you describe their Temperament? What does their Age mean for their Stage of Attachment? How are these two factors likely to combine?

What's Next....

Stay connected for more on Fact 4 and 5 to come...together with Practical Tips on how to support secure transitions based on the Fundamental 5 Facts.

In the meantime, please look out for me on my Instagram Stories and in my private Facebook Group – Dr Sascha's Women's Circle – where I share more information and tips based on science or evidence-based principles but contextualised to the real world, filtered through my own experience as a Mum of four kids, employee, business owner, partner etc...trying to do lots of things while staying sane.

Also, I'll be facilitating the Circle of Security-Parenting Program online very soon and will be in touch to explain this offer further.

I hope this information is helpful on you journey and I look forward to connecting again soon. Thank you for having me into your home and your mind.

Sascha xx